

VHA OFFICE OF MENTAL HEALTH AND SUICIDE PREVENTION

Sociocultural & Linguistic Considerations in Implementing Social Skills Training

**VA Social Skills Training for Serious Mental Illness Training Program
VISN 5 Mental Illness Research Education and Clinical Center (MIRECC)**

http://www.mirecc.va.gov/visn5/training/social_skills.asp

April 27, 2022



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EBP Program's Commitment to Promoting Inclusion and Equity in Accessing High Quality MH Services

- As mental health professionals it is our collective privilege to work toward providing *culturally responsive* care to our nation's Veterans, and to strive to promote equity in our Evidence-Based Psychotherapy Trainings.
- Our goal is to work toward providing training based on best practices regarding racial and cultural competence in the delivery of high-quality mental health services.
- OMHSP invites you to visit their SharePoint link for additional resources for providers, located here: [OMHSP Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Resources](#).



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Overview

- Current state of discrimination experience within VA and rationale for the current presentation
- Overview of sociocultural terms and concepts
- Background on sociocultural and linguistic (SC&L) factors and Social Skills Training (SST)
- General SC&L considerations for SST group facilitators
- SC&L considerations in the Initial Individual Goal Setting Session
- SC&L considerations throughout SST Group Session Sequence
- Reminders & important ideas to highlight
- Resources & references
- Questions

Reflection Question

What sociocultural and linguistic considerations have you encountered when implementing SST or might you encounter in your SST Groups?



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Current State of Discrimination Experience within VA

- Prejudice and discrimination are experienced by Black Veterans (Eliacin et al., 2020) and LGBT Veterans (Ruben et al., 2019), which negatively impacts healthcare engagement.
- In 2020, the SST Training Program conducted 3 focus groups (1 with a Veteran stakeholder panel and 2 with SST facilitators) as part of a needs assessment to understand how the Program can better address diversity, equity, inclusion and advocacy. Responses revealed that Veterans experience discrimination in their healthcare (e.g., power imbalance with providers, bias and stigma).



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Benefit & Need for The Current Presentation

- Given the noted research and SST needs assessment, there is a need and benefit for developing additional trainings for SST facilitators; adapting interventions to increase cultural competency and sensitivity; and targeting diversity, equity, inclusion and advocacy goals and skills in SST groups.
- This presentation supplements the current SST TMS webcourses in presenting essential information about SC&L considerations.

Cultural Competence

“..ongoing process in which the healthcare provider continuously strives to achieve the ability to effectively work within the cultural context of the client (individual, family, community).”

-Campinha-Bacote (2002)

“...the ability of providers and organisations to effectively deliver healthcare services that meet the social, cultural and linguistic needs of patients.

-Betancourt, Green & Carrillo (2002)



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Cultural Humility

“A lifelong commitment to self-evaluation and critique, to redressing power imbalances . . . and to developing mutually beneficial and non-paternalistic partnerships with communities on behalf of individuals and defined populations”

-Tervalon & Murray-Garcia (1998)



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Counselor or Group Facilitator Broaching

Broaching refers to “counselor’s ability to consider how sociopolitical factors such as race influence the client’s counseling concerns. The counselor must learn to recognize the cultural meaning clients attach to phenomena and to subsequently translate that cultural knowledge into meaningful practice that facilitates client empowerment, strengthens the therapeutic alliance, and enhances counseling outcomes.”

-Day-Vines, et al. (2007)



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Broaching Continuum (Days-Vine et al., 2007).

- **Avoidant:** A group facilitator not seeing racial or cultural differences and taking a “color blindness” approach. The group facilitator may not bring up cultural or linguistic considerations in an SST Group.
- **Isolating:** A group facilitator may bring up sociocultural and linguistic considerations (SC&L) a few times and may seem superficially brought up and not in the spirit of making a meaningful impact on the group member, their skill practice, and goal attainment.
- **Continuing/incongruent:** A group facilitator may attempt to bring up SC&L considerations throughout the SST Group but may be ineffective and group facilitator may have limited skills to discuss SC&L factors in their groups. When SC&L is brought up, it may seem scripted or mechanical.
- **Integrated/ congruent:** Group facilitator effectively initiates SC&L conversations and responds to group member comments about personally relevant cultural and linguistic considerations so that social skills, role plays, and outside practice assignments can be better personalized for each group member. This increases the likelihood of success when they use the skills in the community.
- **Infusing:** In addition to integrating SC&L into the group as noted above for the integrated/congruent facilitator, the group facilitator has a well-developed understanding of the sociocultural factors that impact group members’ lives and are involved in advocacy and social justice activities on a broader scale.



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Sociocultural Factors

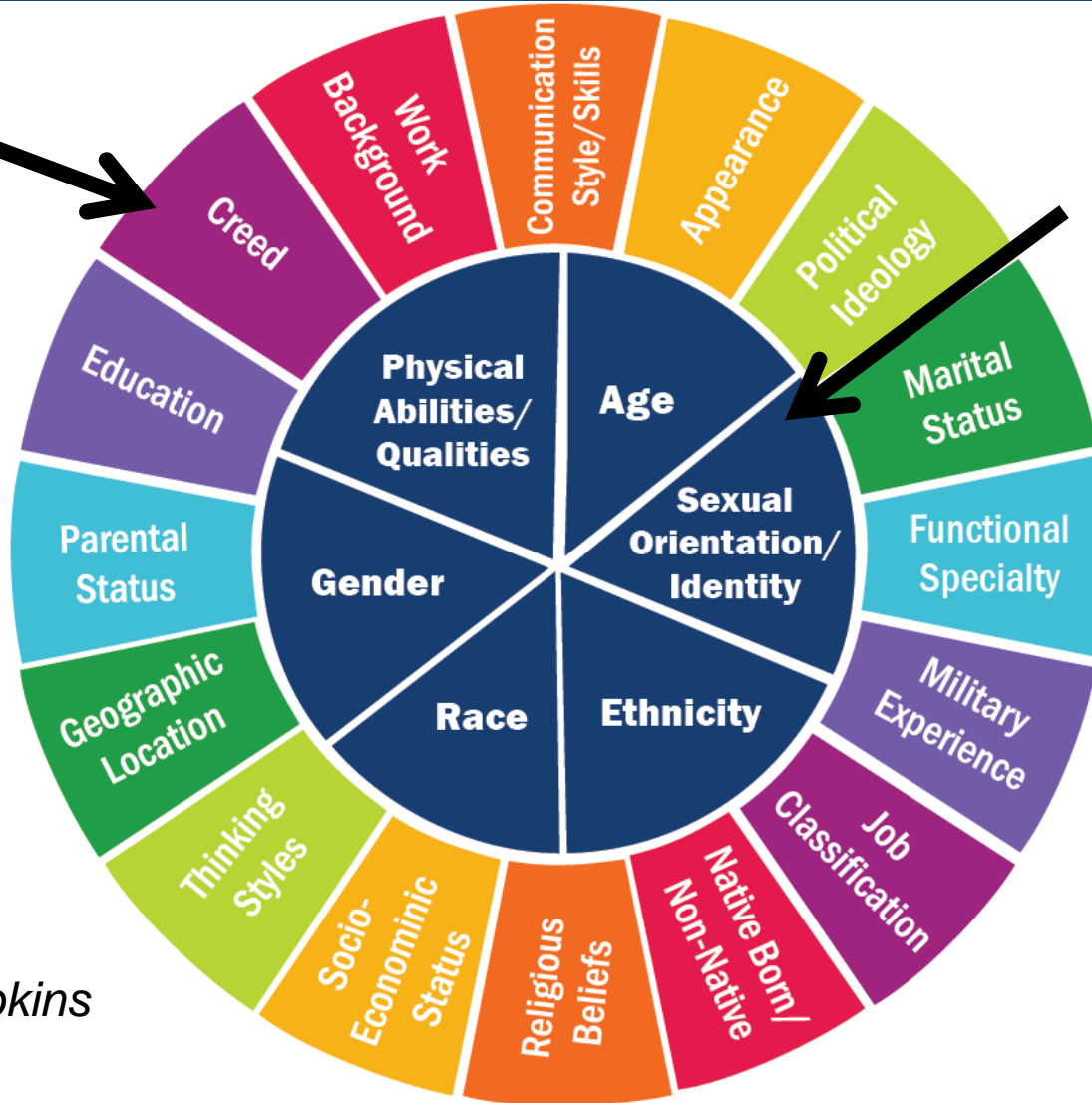
Factors that identify membership in a specific racial or ethnic group, subculture, or socioeconomic class (Bellack et al., 2004):

- Social norms
- Roles
- Values
- Beliefs
- Language

Cultural Identity Wheel

Outside wheel are identities that may change over time.

Inner wheel are identities that may be more fixed and do not have control over.



Some identities are more visible than others.

Source: Johns Hopkins University



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Cultural Identity Wheel

- If a group facilitator chose to use a resource such as the Cultural Identity Wheel just displayed (**it is not formally part of the individual session**), you may help keep the conversation focused on SST during an individual session by asking something such as:

“Are there identities on this wheel that are especially relevant to you right now?”

“In looking at the Cultural Identity Wheel, what identities do you think may be important for me to know more about as you join the SST Group?”

“Which identities seem relevant in your participation in the SST Group?”

Social Skills

“Social skills are the interpersonal behaviors that are socially sanctioned in a given community, and are therefore influenced by the specific sociocultural features of that community.”

-Bellack, Mueser, Gingerich, & Agresta (2004)

Sociocultural Factors & Social Behaviors

- Sociocultural factors may affect social behaviors such as (Bellack et al., 2004):
 - How a person uses or does not use eye contact
 - Distance a person stands from another
 - How assertive a person is
 - How much affect is contained in one's voice or gestures

SST and Sociocultural Considerations in the Literature

- Some culturally responsive adaptations to social skills training have been made (e.g., Kopelowicz et al 2003).
- Although the research on social skill interventions and SC&L considerations and adaptations is limited, it is consistent with culturally responsive adaptations contributing to the effectiveness of the intervention.

Sociocultural Factors and SST

From Bellack et al. (2004):

- “A major error that leaders can make when conducting social skills groups is to operate under the assumption that different cultural groups employ the same verbal and nonverbal patterns of communication.” (p. 99)
- “Clients who learn from models that are out of touch with the nuances of their particular sociocultural group or who are reinforced for behaviors that are maladaptive are unlikely to develop the social skills that are necessary for effective living within their community.” (p. 99)
- “Leaders need to be sensitive to the sociocultural factors relevant to the clients with whom they are working and must be able to modify the skills taught so that they accommodate the differences in lifestyles, values, norms, and preferences.” (p. 99)



Considerations for SST Group Facilitators

- Be aware of your cultural identity, power, privilege, and your own values and beliefs that will impact delivery of SST.
- Also, be aware of and sensitive to history of oppression against certain groups of people.
- Be sensitive to the sociocultural and linguistic factors relevant to the clients with whom you are working so as to increase the likelihood that group members (Bellack et al., 2004):
 - Will use the skills being taught
 - Will have successful experiences with these skills



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Considerations for SST Group Facilitators

- Learning Sociocultural Backgrounds of Group Members:
 - Educate yourself and allow Veterans to educate you about the varied norms for social skills among different communities.
 - Review the chart and take note of possible sociocultural considerations.
 - Attend training sessions or workshops on multicultural issues, or seek consultation with knowledgeable individuals (e.g., Chair of Diversity Committee at your VA facility, a subject matter expert, supervisor).



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Considerations for SST Group Facilitators

- Create a safe group environment:
 - It is important to immediately address any discriminatory language (even if it is unintentional) and hate speech in group.
 - In some more serious instances when racial epithets or other hate speech is used in group, this could be cause for the permanent removal of the group member from the SST group.
 - Addressing discriminatory language may help to foster an environment where group members feel safe.
 - Talking outside of group with a group member that uses discriminatory language in group can also be beneficial to clarify expectations.

Considerations for SST Group Facilitators

- If a group member makes a comment that seems like subtle or indirect discrimination (i.e., a microaggression) and it is not clear if it was intended to cause harm, you might state something such as:

“I feel uncomfortable when you use that term as it could be interpreted as insulting. This may be a good time to remind the group about the group expectations. Let’s take a moment to look at them together.”

- Building safety and trust in the group may help group members be more willing to disclose additional aspects of their identities and social lives. As a result, the discussion of social skills and the role plays and outside practice assignments can be better personalized for each group member. This increases the likelihood of success when they use the skills in the community.

Considerations for SST Group Facilitators

- Be mindful of your language and use inclusive language where possible (e.g., spouse rather than girlfriend).
- Using non-gendered pronouns and language (e.g., they, mail carrier vs. postman).
- Cannot assume a person's identified pronoun. Use pronouns connected to person's gender identity: e.g., He/She/They.
- How to approach use of pronouns in SST:
 - Discussion during SST Individual Goal Setting Session
 - Use names rather than assuming group members' pronouns
 - Chart review
 - Coordination of care with program staff

Initial Individual Goal Setting Session

- All group members participate in an Initial Individual Goal Setting Session before participation in the SST Group to orient group members to SST and to set a goal for group.
- The procedures for the Initial Individual Goal Setting Session are detailed in the SST Initial Individual Goal Setting Session Manual. This manual that has been updated since the SST TMS webcourse.
- The Individual Goal Setting Session Manual now includes attention to sociocultural and linguistic factors throughout the session.

Initial Individual Goal Setting Session

- When discussing the SST group format, group facilitators review how group members' social and cultural backgrounds may impact communication and how the SST Group will address this (e.g., consider group members' cultural and social backgrounds when setting up role plays in group and when developing outside practice).
- Discussion of SST group expectations (AKA group rules), includes the following group expectation:
 - **Respect group members' social, cultural and linguistic differences.** (“Listen when others share their cultural backgrounds, and do not judge or be critical of differences. Social skills may vary based on your background and the social situation. Also, no use of discriminatory language. We want everyone to be safe and valued in the group.”)



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Initial Individual Goal Setting Session

- The Goal Setting Brief Background Interview is **routinely** conducted and includes the following:
 - A query regarding pronouns.
 - Two questions about how a group member's identity may impact participation in SST and/or their SST SMART goal (questions are on the next slide).
- The scripts for these questions are **sample scripts**. Group facilitators may use these scripts or use other language to query about cultural identity and SST Group participation.



Initial Individual Goal Setting Session: Brief Background Interview SC&L Questions

- *Is there anything about your culture, or background that may be important for us to know about and may be relevant to your participation in the SST Group? For example, in some families or cultures someone may not make much eye contact whereas in other families or cultures eye contact is especially important? This is just one example.*
- *In thinking about your goal for the SST group, is there anything related to your identity, culture, or background that may be important to share? For example, some people may have a goal related to their identity (e.g., connecting more to their spiritual community, responding to racist comments, etc.)*



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Initial Individual Goal Setting Session

- The following SC&L points are noted in the goal setting section of the SST Initial Individual Goal Setting Session Manual:
 - Reminder to facilitator and the group member to “Keep in mind any social or cultural factors in your life that may be relevant to your goal.”
 - Goals related to diversity, equity, inclusion, advocacy, and action are included in the list of goal examples that can be shared with group members. Here are two examples:
 - “Address directly the prejudice (or stigmatizing comments) I regularly experience during my weekly softball practices.”
 - “Communicate to my healthcare providers about my pronouns in all my upcoming appointments over the next 3 months.”



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Initial Individual Goal Setting Session: Let's Watch!

- We will watch a video of an SST Group Facilitator and SST Group Member discussing the two SC&L related questions from the Brief Background Interview.
- As the video notes, this is only a **segment** of a longer Initial Individual Goal Setting session. The procedures for the Initial Individual Goal Setting Session are detailed in the **SST Initial Individual Goal Setting Session Manual**.
- Here is the video: [Example of an SST Initial Individual Goal Setting Session](#)



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First SST Group Session

- At the beginning of group after introductions and discussing the SST Group purpose and structure, group facilitators may introduce how sociocultural factors will be integrated into the SST Group.
- Introducing sociocultural factors at the beginning of the group curriculum may help to create a space where group members feel comfortable sharing information about their culture and social backgrounds.
- This introduction may need to be repeated for open groups.

First SST Group Session

Sample script to introduce sociocultural factors after reviewing the SST group purpose and structure:

“We have different backgrounds and cultures which may impact how we communicate with others in person. Our various values and norms may mean that the way that one person interacts looks somewhat different from another person; for example, one person’s culture may emphasize the importance of eye contact whereas another culture may consider too much eye contact to be rude when talking to certain people. We think a strength of this group is that you all come with different backgrounds and we hope that we can honor those differences, and also make sure to consider them when we are practicing using these new skills in your lives during group and outside of group. The content of the role plays you choose to do in group and in your outside practice may vary based on your goals and your culture. We want to be mindful that different cultures have unique ways of communicating. In SST we encourage you to bring up how practicing these skills may look different for you based on your background and the setting so we can make this group as useful to you as possible.”

First SST Group Session: Group Expectations

- Group Expectations: Discuss the group expectation that addresses sociocultural factors and discriminatory language:
 - **Respect group members' social, cultural and linguistic differences.**



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First SST Group Session: Group Expectations

- Adapt other group expectations or group engagement skills to fit the culture.
 - For example, SST group leaders in Puerto Rico found it culturally appropriate & acceptable for group members to speak at the same time rather than one person at a time.
 - Another example: SST group leaders in Puerto Rico delayed redirecting group members when they were off topic. They allowed group members to express their thoughts before reframing statements or redirecting them. Individuals raised in a Puerto Rican context may not expect others to be straight forward in their communication, or to be redirected and interrupted while they are talking.



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Sociocultural and Linguistic Considerations and the SST Group Session Sequence

- Let's now think about your SST Groups and incorporating cultural and linguistic considerations throughout the **SST Group Session Sequence** so that social skills, role plays, and outside practice assignments can be better personalized for each group member. This increases the likelihood of success when group members use the skills in the community and increases the likelihood of SST goal attainment.
- The sample scripts included for each section of the SST Group Session Sequence are suggestions. You are encouraged to consider other ways to discuss SC&L factors in your SST Groups.
- Sample scripts can be found in the SST Quick Guide.



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SST Quick Guide

Social Skills Training for Serious Mental Illness (SST) Quick Guide

Preparing for SST Group Sessions

- ✓ Review SST Group Session Sequence (in this guide)
- ✓ Review the Social Skills Group Observation Checklist (SSGOC) or the SSGOC Detailed Anchor Points Version
- ✓ Review skill in SST book (starting p. 193; including reading rationale, becoming familiar with steps, reading sample role play scenarios, and special considerations)
- ✓ Copy handouts with skill title and steps only from SST website (see last page for link)
- ✓ Prepare and copy outside practice sheet
- ✓ When applicable, prepare and copy measures for group members to complete at group session starting
- ✓ Have a list of group members' SST Goals
- ✓ Assign leaders to primary and secondary roles; discuss tasks and roles related to secondary group leaders and plan the meeting
- ✓ Prepare room (e.g., chairs in semi-circle, prop flip chart/dry erase board)
- ✓ Check audio recorder settings and conduct recording (if applicable)

Note About the Very First SST Group:

For your very first group you will want to add to beginning of the agenda:

1. Introductions of group leaders and group members
2. Review of group purpose and structure (You may need to

3. Discuss how sociocultural factors will be integrated in group

5. Provide the opportunity for group members to share individual goals with the group
6. You will not Review Outside Practice in the very first group as the group

SST and Recovery Goal for SST

Always keep in mind that Social Skills Training is a Recovery-Oriented Treatment. Therefore, in every session you should encourage and empower the group member to move forward with their recovery and the goal identified for SST. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration website states that "Recovery is a process of change through which individuals improve their health and wellness, live self-directed lives, and strive to reach their full potential." Goal setting is an important part of the recovery process.

Sociocultural & Linguistic Factors in SST

"Social skills are the interpersonal behaviors that are socially sanctioned in a given community, and are therefore influenced by the specific sociocultural features of that community" (p. 98, Bellack et. al, 2004). Effectiveness of SST is related to social, cultural, and linguistic factors. These factors can be integrated throughout the group session sequence (e.g.,

-Respect group members' social, cultural, and linguistic differences. ("Listen when others share their cultural backgrounds. Do not judge or be critical of differences. Social skills may vary based on your background and the social situation. Also, no use of discriminatory language. We want everyone to be safe and valued in the group.")

the social situation. Also, no use of discriminatory language. ("Listen when others share their cultural backgrounds. Do not judge or be critical of differences. Social skills may vary based on your background and the social situation. Also, no use of discriminatory language. We want everyone to be safe and valued in the group.")

-No name-calling or cursing. ("No name-calling or cursing. Let's work together to make sure that SST group is a positive experience for everyone.")

-No eating during group. ("Please no eating during group. We have found that eating in group can distract from practice and people giving meaningful feedback.")



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SST GROUP SESSION SEQUENCE

Welcome and set agenda/Review group guidelines

Step 1. Review outside practice (for sessions other than the first session)

Step 2. Establish a rationale for the skill

Step 3. Briefly have members share a relevant experience or rationale

Step 4. Explain the steps of the skill

Step 5. Model the skill; review with members

Step 6. Have a group member role play

Step 7. Elicit and provide positive, then constructive feedback

Step 8. Have the member role play again

Step 9. Elicit and provide positive, then constructive feedback

Step 10. Repeat role play again and elicit/provide positive feedback

Step 11. Repeat Steps 6-10 with each group member

Step 12. Develop outside practice assignments

Reviewing Outside Practice Assignment

- During the review of the outside practice, group facilitators can ask group members if there were any sociocultural or linguistic considerations that may have arisen when they practiced the skill:

“When you practiced the skill, did you notice you modified any of the steps because of the social norms of the situation?”

“When you practiced the skill, did you change anything to make it work better for you?”



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Reviewing the Rationale

- In discussing the rationale, you can ask the group to reflect on their sociocultural background and identity to increase the likelihood of group members practicing the skills and having successful experiences with using the skills.



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Reviewing the Rationale

- You might say something such as the following when introducing a new skill and reviewing the rationale:

“In thinking about your backgrounds, values, and norms, is there anything that may make this skill especially important to practice?”

“Are there any challenges that you can foresee in practicing this skill because of your cultural background or because of social norms in a group you identify with?”

“How do you think this would go in your community?”



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Reviewing the Rationale

- Another conversation you might have as part of the rationale is regarding using skills effectively in given situations.
- For example, group members may consider how the skill is practiced differently in various contexts and how it may vary based on the relationship (e.g., the way someone speaks with a grandparent may be different than how they address their boss).

Reviewing the Rationale

- Group members may be asked to reflect on examples that are culturally specific (e.g., Asking for Information about church services).
- Think about additional special considerations when teaching a skill that may not be directly addressed in Bellack et al., 2004.
- For example, “Giving Compliments” – Discuss using appropriate language given the situation and people they are giving compliments to.



Reviewing the Steps of the Skill

- Ask the group to reflect on their sociocultural background and identity when reviewing the steps.
- This type of conversation when reviewing the steps of the skill may increase the likelihood that group members practice the skills in their everyday lives and have successful experiences with using the skills.

Reviewing the Steps of the Skill

- It can be helpful to ask about how specific steps of the skill may be modified after reviewing each step or after reviewing all steps of the skill.

“The way these steps are practiced may look different based on your community and social expectations.”

“How may the steps of the skill be modified depending on your community?”

Group Member Role Plays

- Individualize role plays:
 - Use scenarios related to group member's culture, lifestyle, values, etc.
 - Remind group members that the verbal statements included in the social skill curricular skill sheets are only examples of what to say and are encouraged to use language that is consistent with how they would communicate.
 - Inquire about whether and how the steps of the skill may be modified based on the group member's cultural norms, background, etc.
 - This may help to increase the usefulness and success in practicing the skills.



Group Member Role Plays

- Modifications may include (from Bellack et al., 2004):
 - How a person uses or does not use eye contact.
 - Distance a person stands from another
 - How assertive a person is
 - How much affect is contained in one's voice or gestures



Group Member Role Plays

- During the role play set up, you can ask directly about any adaptations or modifications the group member may make:

“For Step 1, are there any changes you think you would make to how you practice this step based on your cultural norms or background?; for example, you have said before that sometimes people in your cultural group may limit their eye contact when talking to certain people.”

- In individualizing role plays, you may modify verbal statements listed in the steps of the social skill. See steps highlighted in red in slides to follow as some examples.



Group Member Role Plays: Modifying the Steps of the Skill

Making Requests

Step 1. Look at the person.

Step 2. Say exactly what you would like the person to do.

Step 3. Tell the person how it would make you feel.
In making your request, use phrases like:

“I would like you to_____.”

“I would really appreciate it if you would do
_____.”

“It’s very important to me that you help me with
_____.”



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Group Member Role Plays: Modifying the Steps of the Skill

Entering into an Ongoing Conversation

Step 1. Wait for a break in the flow of the conversation.

Step 2. Say something like “May I join you?”

Step 3. Decide whether the people engaged in the conversation are OK with your joining in.

Step 4. Say things related to the subject of the conversation.



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Outside Practice Development

- Help group members to set up an outside practice that is focused on effectiveness by taking into consideration social, cultural, and linguistic factors:

“When you do your outside practice, do you think it would be effective for you to change Step 2 like you did in group today?”

“How might you change the steps of the skill when you practice outside of group?”



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Linguistic Factors in Social Skills Training

- Recruit a bilingual group co-facilitator.
- Model the skill in the preferred language of group members.
- Have group members role play in the language(s) they are most comfortable conversing/using.
- Translate materials or spontaneously translate the group session.
- Use the SST Forms & Handouts that are translated into Spanish. Click [here](#) to access these forms (scroll down to the section titled “SST Group Handouts/Resources in Spanish”).



Reminders and Important Ideas to Highlight

- Continuously monitor where you are on the broaching continuum discussed earlier (e.g., Congruent/Incongruent, Integrated/Congruent) and consider ways to move along the continuum towards being even more Integrated/Congruent and Infusing in your SST groups.



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Reminders and Important Ideas to Highlight

- Missteps will happen!
 - Be patient with yourself and others
 - Apologize, thank the person, and be non-defensive:

“I’m sorry. Thank you for that feedback. This will help me to be a more effective SST group facilitator.”
- Use missteps as a learning experience
- Think about actions you can take to address missteps (e.g., individual sessions with group members).



Resources

- SST Quick Guide
- SST Individual Goal Setting Session Manual

SST Manual (Bellack et al., 2004)

- Chapter 6 – Using Curricula for SST Groups
- Chapter 7 – Tailoring Skills for Individual Needs

SST Forms & Handouts in Spanish

- VISN 5 MIRECC Website - VA Social Skills Training Program:

http://www.mirecc.va.gov/visn5/training/social_skills.asp

Resources

Social Skills Training for Schizophrenia: A Step-by-Step Guide (Bellack, Mueser, Gingerich, & Agresta, 2004)

Translated:

- Italian – 1st edition
- Korean – 1st edition
- Chinese – 2nd edition
- Japanese – 2nd edition
- Swedish – 2nd edition
- Turkish – 2nd edition

Resources and Relevant Readings

- [VA EEO, Diversity and Inclusion, No FEAR and Whistleblower Rights and Protection Policy Statement.](#)
- [Office of Resolution Management, Diversity, and Inclusion.](#)
- [OMHSP Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Resources.](#)
- [TMS Trainings](#) on diversity and inclusion.
- Providing [culturally responsive care with telehealth.](#)
- [Office of Health Equity](#)



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